

CALIFORNIA CHILD WELFARE COUNCIL
Prevention and Early Intervention Committee

California Differential Response Framework
Core Elements of Differential Response

Differential Response (DR) is a practice that allows Child Welfare Services (CWS) to vary their approach to child abuse and neglect referrals based on established criteria, which can include the severity of alleged abuse, prior history with CWS, and cooperation of the parents. Often called “Multiple Track” or “Alternative Response”, Differential Response enables CWS, the community and families to respond to an allegation in the least invasive manner while still ensuring the safety and well being of children.

Review of Differential Response methodology currently being utilized in over 20 states, as well as current practice within California was analyzed in order to identify core elements that are considered necessary for the successful implementation of this approach throughout the State. These core elements are intended to serve as a framework, allowing for each county to implement the elements in a manner reflective of the communities they serve.

CORE ELEMENTS OF DIFFERENTIAL RESPONSE

1. **Path System:** A system that allows for the placement of families along a continuum of responses based on specified initial review criteria. It is recommended that California’s DR system contain three paths:

Path One: Provides for a prevention or early intervention response for families that: (A) are evaluated out after hotline referral to CWS because they do not meet the threshold for child abuse and neglect; (B) contact CWS for assistance where no hotline referral has been made; and/or (C) are at risk of child abuse and neglect due to family factors including substance abuse, mental health or domestic violence. Path One families are linked/referred to community based agencies on a voluntary basis and offered identified services. It is recommended that Path One incorporate identification of families within the community that may fall into Category C. These services may or may not be contracted under CWS, but provide for a continuum of care for families who are at-risk, but where child abuse and neglect is not yet a factor.

As Differential Response is brought fully to Scale, Path 1 essentially embodies a prevention network. Families who are at-risk of child abuse and neglect, but who have not been referred to the Child Protection Hotline will also be eligible for Path 1 services and supports. This fundamental change means that families will no longer be required to enter services by means of referral to the child abuse hotline.

Path Two: Provides for a CWS and/or community supportive services response for families referred to CWS for child abuse or neglect that are identified as low or moderate risk. Working with Community partners in Path Two is a voluntary program; however

families unable or unwilling to comply with recommendations may be elevated to a more intensive CWS response.

Path Three: Provides for an investigatory track for families with previous substantiated allegations and/or that are identified as high-risk based on specified review criteria, in alignment with traditional CWS services. Path Three utilizes community resources to support the services required by CWS in order to ensure safety.

2. **Initial Review Criteria:** Upon referral or contact with CWS, clearly specified review criteria should be established to ensure a consistent response. These criteria should include: (A) Child Maltreatment Category; (B) Age of Child; (C) Prior History with CWS; (D) Cooperation of the Parents/Caregivers; and (E) Source of the Report.
3. **Strength Based Approach:** Regardless of the Path assigned, all responses should incorporate a strength based approach and provide families with every opportunity to participate in their assessment and the development of their service plan. This could include the following: Team Decision Making (TDM); Family Group Decision-Making; and other multidisciplinary approaches that incorporate the family, their support systems and community providers.
4. **Structured Referral Process:** In order to ensure that families are linked and engaged in services, a well structured referral process should be established. This would include the completion of standardized referral forms that incorporate sufficient information that enables community providers to ensure appropriate services are offered. In order to maintain confidentiality, this process will also necessitate completion of releases from the family to the referral source.
5. **Planned Facilitation Process:** To provide families with every opportunity to access services needed, a planned facilitation process will be required. Facilitation of services may be offered through the community and/or CWS, however a coordinated plan will be necessary in order to increase positive outcomes for families referred to services. This may include: outreach and engagement interventions; transportation; child care resources; services in the evenings/weekends or in the home; and assistance with the cost of services.

In order to further enhance the opportunities for families involved with CWS, it is recommended that California establish ***priority access*** to all identified services for families referred due to an allegation of child abuse and neglect. It is further recommended that every effort be made to enhance resources for the most hard to acquire services including: mental health, substance abuse treatment and housing.

6. **County Defined Follow-up Process:** In order to evaluate the consistency and continued efficacy of the DR approach, a defined follow-up process is recommended. This process would include the tracking of families to identify receipt and completion of services, as well as recidivism to CWS. In order to maintain confidentiality, this process will also necessitate completion of releases from the family to CWS. The suggested follow up process must be supported by a robust, integrated data collection system.